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# **How gender quotas affect the gender gap in campaign spending: An analysis of the federal and regional elections in Belgium**

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# **How gender quotas affect the gender gap in campaign spending: An analysis of the federal and regional elections in Belgium**

## **Introduction**

This article examines whether the introduction of gender quotas has increased inequality in terms of individual campaign spending between female and male parliamentary candidates. Based on the analysis of official campaign declarations by 10,436 candidates, we examine how the individual election campaign expenses of female and male candidates have changed over nine consecutive federal and regional elections in Belgium (1991-2014). Earlier research on the link between gender and campaign finance in proportional electoral systems suggests that female expenses are significantly lower than male expenses (Engeli and Lutz 2014; Maddens, Weekers, and Noppe 2006; Wauters, Weekers, and Maddens 2010). In this contribution, we explain these differences and examine how they are related to the introduction of quota regulations in the case of the Belgian flexible-list PR system.

Over recent decades, various measures have been taken to improve the representation of women in political institutions (Krook 2007; Krook and Norris 2014). Quota regulations have been introduced in several countries, which, in interaction with other initiatives, successfully increased the presence of female MPs in parliaments (Paxton, Hughes, and Painter 2010; Tripp and Kang 2008). At the same time, however, women still remain underrepresented in the political arena. Quotas did not lead to perfect gender parity in parliaments.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, with comparative data by country and world and regional averages: <http://www.ipu.org/iss-e/women.htm>.

If we want to explain the persistence of gender inequality in the political and electoral arena, it is relevant to go beyond the mere analysis of the number of elected women (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012), and to evaluate the effects of gender quotas in accordance with other aspects of the electoral process, among others political finance and campaign spending behavior. This article does so by addressing the following research question: is the introduction of gender quotas associated with a gender gap in campaign spending? The imposition of legislative quota regulations on political parties in Belgium led to a sudden surge in the presence of women candidates on party lists. Earlier research shows that, initially, these new candidates were politically inexperienced and less supported by party elites (Wauters, Weekers, and Maddens 2010). After a couple of elections, however, differences in terms of list positions between female and male candidates decreased.

We expect that the introduction of quota regulations leads to unequal individual campaign spending between female and male parliamentary candidates. This inequality would in turn deteriorate women's political prospects, since individual campaign spending efforts affect candidates' personal election outcomes. Previous research has demonstrated that candidates spending more on their campaigns generally receive more votes (Abramowitz 1991; Samuels 2001). Even in flexible-list systems, where ballot rank is the decisive factor in intra-party seat allocation, candidates are incentivized to run personalized election campaigns with individual campaign expenses (Bräuninger, Brunner, and Daübler 2012). Crisp et al. (2013) demonstrate that, despite a lack of clear structural incentives to cultivate personal votes in flexible-list systems, candidates with high numbers of preferential votes are rewarded with better ballot positions in future elections. As a consequence, if the introduction of quota regulations indeed leads to spending inequality among male and female candidates, this will generate significant

differences in terms of preferential votes and create a structural disadvantage for women on party lists in this relatively popular electoral system.

In an effort to tackle this puzzle, we focus on the Belgian case where legislative quota regulations have been introduced in three consecutive steps since the second half of the 1990s. We examine whether a gender gap existed regarding the amount of campaign expenses and whether the evolution in this gender gap coincides with the introduction of Belgian quota laws. Given the gradual and stepwise introduction of these quota laws, we believe Belgium is an interesting case to assess the effects of gender quota regulations on the campaign spending behavior of male and female candidates in flexible-list PR systems.

The next section first presents a more extensive discussion of earlier literature on gender effects in campaign finance. Afterwards, we elaborate on how the introduction of quota regulations affects campaign spending and through which mechanism gender inequality in spending disadvantages female candidates in flexible-list PR systems. This will lead us to formulate a number of testable hypotheses. We then turn to the case of Belgium and discuss the nature of its flexible-list PR electoral system, quota laws and campaign finance regulations. After presenting the collected data and methods, we discuss the results of the empirical analysis. The conclusion puts the main findings in theoretical perspective and discusses generalizability beyond the Belgian case to similar electoral systems.

### **The link between gender and campaign finance**

Most research on the relationship between gender and campaign finance has focused on majoritarian electoral systems. While some scholars claim that women candidates are less able

to attract financial support for their election campaigns (Jenkins 2007; Sanbonmatsu, Carroll, and Walsh 2009), others expect a gender gap with regard to actual campaign spending (Hogan 2007). However, empirical studies show that gender does not have a significant effect on candidates' fundraising skills and capacities (Adams and Schreiber 2010; Werner 1997), nor on their campaign spending levels (Hogan 2007).

The scarce research on proportional electoral systems, on the other hand, presents a different story. Engeli and Lutz (2014) analysed two Swiss lower house elections and show that the level of campaign spending for male candidates was significantly higher than for female candidates. Studies on the Belgian case found similar effects of gender on campaign expenses (Maddens, Weekers, and Noppe 2006; Wauters, Weekers, and Maddens 2010).

Why should we expect such a link between gender and campaign finance? Scholars often refer to the 'sacrificial lambs' hypothesis as the underlying mechanism explaining a possible gender effect in this regard. The argument mainly pertains to differences in candidate expectations and motivations in majoritarian electoral systems (Bernstein 1986; Burrell 1992): although party elites encourage women to participate in elections and nominate them accordingly, female candidates would only be allowed to run for non-winnable seats. This disincentivizes women candidates to engage in fundraising activities and to run expensive election campaigns. Yet again there is no empirical support for this claim in majoritarian systems (Palmer and Dimon 2001; Sanbonmatsu, 2006).

In proportional electoral systems, however, the sacrificial lamb hypothesis might still have its applicability. Political parties in these systems are expected to draft lists of candidates for parliamentary office. Self-evidently, not every list position provides realistic chances of

winning a seat (Hazan and Rahat 2010), and candidates in unrealistic list positions will be less motivated to invest in expensive campaigns. Especially in list PR systems where rank order plays a decisive role in intraparty seat allocation, the upper or realistic list positions can be considered the equivalent of winnable seats in majoritarian systems, and candidates in unrealistic positions can be expected to spend significantly lower amounts during campaigns.

In these electoral systems, it can be argued that if women are systematically overrepresented amongst lower positioned candidates, then they will become demotivated to run individual election campaigns. If women, on the contrary, would get equally assigned to realistic positions on party lists as men, they will be inclined to match the campaign expenses of their co-partisans. In many countries, the introduction of gender quotas strongly affected the incidence of female candidates on upper list positions (Krook 2007).

### **How quotas affect the gender gap in campaign spending: arguments and hypotheses**

We argue that the introduction of gender quotas substantially affects the gender gap in campaign spending as a result of a conflict between the predominantly male party elite and the group of women candidates (Niven 1998; Tremblay and Pelletier 2001). The male party elites will initially perceive new female candidates in terms of stereotypes and consider them as having less political capabilities (Meier 2008). As important political institutions (i.e. parties, parliaments and governments) are strongly dominated by men, the perception arises that men are more likely to be politically successful than women. When confronted with new quota regulations, party elites will therefore not be inclined to grant female candidates realistic list

positions, believing that male candidates will be more successful and attract more votes and support.

We thus expect that women receive unrealistic list positions and that their candidacy will not be equally supported by the party elite immediately after the initial introduction of quotas. Moreover, these inexperienced female candidates in unrealistic list positions will feel they were mainly nominated by the party to fulfil the quota requirements, which makes them less motivated to run expensive campaigns, even when compared with male candidates in comparable list positions. As mentioned earlier, this jeopardizes women's future political careers, as recent research on intra-party dynamics in flexible-list systems suggests that candidates with higher numbers of preferential votes are rewarded with better ballot list positions in future elections (Crisp et al. 2013). As women candidates spend less than their male counterparts, male dominated party selectorates will even have an 'objective' argument to deselect woman candidates or to favour male candidates for realistic list positions. Moreover, this is all the more problematic given the findings by Fulton (2012, 2013) that women, when controlling for political quality and valence, have to work harder than men to perform at parity with male politicians in the electoral arena. Finally, these new women candidates will mainly replace the less motivated male candidates, as the group of highly motivated and successful men are regarded as serious contenders by the party selectorate. This will broaden the gender gap in campaign spending even further in the short run. In sum, we assume that the spending differences between female and male candidates in unrealistic list positions will increase in the immediate aftermath of the introduction of quota regulations.

With regard to realistic positions on candidate lists, however, we expect to see a substantially different pattern. The initially few female realistic candidates can be expected to be highly



motivated, not only because they feel more confident about their election chances but also because they feel more supported by the party elite. As a result, female candidates on realistic list positions will not be easily outspent by their male competitors, even immediately after the introduction of gender quotas.

After a couple of elections, we expect the gender gap in campaign expenses among unrealistic candidates to decrease. Party elites will get used to the fact that a large proportion of their candidates are women, and women will increasingly become part of the party elite, which loses its predominantly male character. Women will consequently become more supported by party elites, increasing their chances of actually winning a seat in parliament. Moreover, personal successes of female candidates in previous elections and the growing number of female MPs in parliament will strengthen the belief of women in a successful parliamentary career and motivate them to run more expensive election campaigns.

On the basis of these arguments we formulate two hypotheses. While H1 relates to candidates in unrealistic list positions, H2 concerns candidates in realistic list positions.

*H1. While the difference in campaign spending levels between female and male candidates in unrealistic list positions will increase immediately after the introduction of gender quotas, this difference will gradually decrease again over time.*

*H2. There is no difference in campaign spending levels between female and male candidates in realistic list positions.*

## **Gender quotas and campaign spending in Belgium**

This article focuses on the case of the Belgian federal Lower House elections and the Flemish regional elections. For both types of elections a flexible-list electoral system applies, voters being able to endorse the party list as a whole or to cast one or more preferential votes for specific candidates.<sup>2</sup> In theory, both the party provided rank order and the number of preferential votes play an important role in the intraparty seat allocation. In practice, however, the threshold of preferential votes to overcome the list order is reached very infrequently (Wauters and Weekers 2008).

Gender quotas have been introduced for Belgian elections during the second half of the 1990s to increase the presence of women in parliaments (Meier 2012; Celis and Meier 2006). After the 1987 and 1991 Lower House elections, only 16 (7.5%) and 20 (9.4%) of the members of parliament were women. In 1994, this male dominated parliament approved a law on the more equal distribution of party list positions between men and women. In the 1999 parliamentary elections, the new quota regulations were imposed on the parties for the first time. The law stated that no more than two third of the candidates on a party list could be of the same sex.

None of the clauses in the initial law involved the realistic positions on the list, which are of course of crucial importance in the Belgian flexible-list system (Celis and Meier 2006). As a result, the effect of these quotas on the composition of parliament was relatively limited at first: the number of elected women MPs only increased from 11.5% in 1995 to 19.3% in 1999. In

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<sup>2</sup> The only exception being the 1991 federal elections, where voters could endorse the party list as a whole or cast only one preferential vote for a specific candidate.

2002, the law became stricter in the sense that the number of female and male candidates on party lists had to be equal (a difference of one candidate allowed in the event of an uneven number of list positions). Moreover, at least one of the top three candidates had to be of different sex. These regulations were in place during the 2003 Lower House and 2004 regional elections. Before the 2007 elections, the quota regulations again slightly changed to impose gender parity in the top two positions on the list. Table 1 summarizes the Belgian quota regulations per election.

< Table 1 about here >

When it comes to campaign spending, Belgian candidates are limited by strict spending caps in their election campaigns (Maddens et al. 2017). Table 2 shows how Belgian party finance law determines spending caps for election candidates. As a general rule, all effective candidates and the first successor candidate are allowed to spend 5,000 euros during the official electoral campaign period, while all other successor candidates are subject to a spending limit of 2,500 euros.<sup>3</sup> Although these amounts seem relatively small, previous research on electoral campaigning in Belgium has shown that individual expenses significantly affect candidates' electoral results (Maddens and Put 2013).

< Table 2 about here >

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<sup>3</sup> Effective candidates are those who can be directly elected to parliament, on the basis of their individual preferential votes and/or their place on the list. Successor candidates are assigned to a separate and additional list. When an elected MP does not take the seat, becomes a minister, resigns or leaves the seat vacant due to illness or death, a successor candidate will take this seat, again based on preferential votes and/or place on the list.

Additionally, candidates in realistic list positions have higher spending caps. These are the first  $N$  candidates at the top of the party list in a constituency, where  $N$  equals the number of seats that particular list won in the previous election, plus one additional candidate. The number of realistic list positions thus varies across parties and party lists. These candidates are allowed to spend substantially higher amounts, in proportion to the number of voters in the constituency where they run for election. In the run-up to the 2014 elections, for instance, a realistic candidate for the Lower House in the constituency of Antwerp was allowed to spend 53,526 euros.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the statistical analysis in this article, we apply the dichotomy between realistic and unrealistic list positions introduced by Hazan and Rahat (2010, 13-14). After all, Table 2 shows that the Belgian party finance law explicitly distinguishes a group of realistic candidates with a significantly higher chance of winning a seat, namely the  $N$  first candidates plus 1.

## **Data and variables**

The empirical analysis in this article includes all the Flemish candidates of the six major parties for the seven Belgian Lower House elections and the five Flemish regional elections since

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<sup>4</sup> The extent to which candidates actually spend these amounts strongly varies between political parties. For instance, while candidates from smaller Belgian parties such as Agalev/Groen barely spend any campaign money at all, their counterparts from CD&V often spend between 80 and 90% of what is legally allowed (Maddens et al. 2017).

1991.<sup>5</sup> The analysis thus starts with the 1991 elections where no quota regulations were in place yet.

The dependent variable is the total amount of campaign expenses, as declared by the candidates on their campaign expenses declaration after each election.<sup>6</sup> We look at the relative campaign expenses by calculating the number of campaign expenses, expressed in eurocent, per registered voter in the electoral district. This operationalization is in line with research on other country cases such as Ireland (Benoit and Marsh 2010), Japan (Cox and Thies 2000), Switzerland (Engeli and Lutz 2014) and Belgium (Maddens and Put 2013). The dependent variable is semi-continuous: it has a right-skewed continuous distribution of non-negative values, but is at the same time characterized by a high proportion of zero values (Min and Agresti 2002). In this case, the point mass at zero refers to the candidates that did not spend anything for their campaign at all.<sup>7</sup> We should consider these zeros as actual response outcomes and take them into account in our analysis.

The key independent variables of this study are the sex of party candidates (dummy variable: 1 = female; 0 = male) and list position (dummy variable: 1 = realistic candidate; 0 = unrealistic candidate). We also include the interaction between both variables to test our hypotheses on

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<sup>5</sup> These parties are: CVP/CD&V, PVV/VLD/OpenVld, SP/sp.a, Agalev/Groen, Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang and VU/N-VA.

<sup>6</sup> In order to make the expenses comparable across time, all amounts are recalculated in prices of December 2016, on the basis of the official Belgian consumer price index.

<sup>7</sup> Of all 10,436 observations in our dataset, 17.1% did not spend anything. These observations are mainly candidates of Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang and Agalev/Groen, which traditionally spend significantly less than those of other parties.

the gender gap in campaign spending among realistic versus unrealistic list positions. Moreover, it is also important to include the dummy variable for realistic list positions for another reason: the level of campaign spending strongly depends on the maximum amount that candidates are allowed to spend. As explained earlier, candidates in realistic positions enjoy higher spending caps, which allows them to outspend their lower ranked co-partisans and the majority of competitors on other party lists. Additionally, given their highly visible position on the list, these candidates have realistic chances of winning a seat, as a result of which they are arguably more motivated to run expensive campaigns. Since previous research shows that women are still underrepresented on upper list positions and male candidates are consequently more often allowed to spend the maximum amount (Celis and Meier 2006), we need to control for the effect of realistic positions. Identifying the group of realistic candidates with higher spending caps is relatively straightforward as these spending caps are reported on the campaign expenses declarations.

We also control for the effect of other independent variables that expectedly affect levels of campaign spending by candidates. First, the incumbency status of candidates might affect spending behaviour in two opposite ways (Jacobson 1990). On the one hand, holding parliamentary or executive office may reduce the need for politicians to invest heavily in campaigns, since incumbents are already better known to the average voter as their office provided them with more visibility. On the other hand, incumbents can generally rely on extensive political and campaign networks and more financial means than their competitors, which might have a positive effect on campaign expenses.

Additionally, we include age (continuous) and profession (categorical variable with seven responses) in the model, which both affect campaign expenses according to previous research

(Maddens and Put 2013). By including profession, we can moreover control for the fact that women candidates are more often than men unemployed (e.g. being a housewife or being retired), hence having less financial resources at their disposal to wage an expensive campaign (Charles 2011). In addition, profession can also be considered a proxy for the social and political network of candidates, and therefore their electoral attractiveness for party selectorates (Cairney 2007). Political party (categorical variable with five responses) is also controlled for, as earlier studies on campaign spending show considerable differences between Belgian parties in terms of campaign spending cultures (Maddens et al. 2017).

Next, we include type of election (dummy variable: 1 = Lower House election; 0 = Flemish Parliament election) in the model, since previous research suggests that candidates tend to spend more for regional elections (Maddens et al. 2017).<sup>8</sup> To conclude, we control for district magnitude (number of seats in the district) as it is a proxy for the scale of electoral competition taking place in the district. The lower the number of seats to be distributed, the more the district will resemble single member district systems which tightens competition and incentivizes candidates to spend more. Moreover, larger districts will enable candidates to achieve economies of scale, leading to relatively lower campaign expenses.

## **Analysis**

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<sup>8</sup> For multiple reasons, we do not expect to see significant differences in terms of gender inequality between federal and regional elections. First, parties competing with each other on both levels are exactly the same, and second, the fairly high degree of level-hopping in the Belgian political arena indicates that politicians themselves rate the federal and regional level as relatively equal (Vanlangenakker, Maddens, and Put 2013).

We first calculated the percentage of women among realistic and unrealistic candidates between 1991 and 2014. Figure 1 shows that, notwithstanding the introduction of gender quotas for Belgian elections, women are still systematically underrepresented in realistic positions. While the percentage of women among realistic candidates has clearly increased since 1991, there is still no perfect gender parity as female candidates make out only about 40% among this group. Although gender quotas force Belgian parties to nominate an equal amount of female and male candidates on each party list and oblige them to put a woman on one of the first three/two positions since 2003 (see Table 1), this did not translate into full gender equality with regard to the realistic list positions. Recently, Marien, Schouteden, and Wauters (2017) reported similar findings for the Belgian 2012 local elections, where the top of the list remained male-dominated (80% of lists has male candidate on first position) even though identical quota regulations were in place.

< Figure 1 about here >

What effect does this have on the campaign spending behaviour of female and male candidates in Belgian elections? Figure 2 shows the mean campaign expenses (expressed in eurocent per registered voter) of the candidates by election year and sex for the Lower House and the Flemish Parliament separately. More specifically, while the upper panels (a and b) display the results for realistic candidates, the bottom panels (c and d) focus on candidates in the other list positions.<sup>9</sup> The graphs illustrate that male candidates initially outspent their female colleagues, yet that the difference decreased in recent years.

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<sup>9</sup> The reported gender differences in campaign spending cannot be reduced to unequal financial support for candidates by political parties themselves. On the contrary, the share of party financial support in the individual campaigns of female candidates is on average 5% higher, which confirms that reported differences reflect women being less inclined to invest personal resources into their campaigns than their male counterparts (Maddens et al. 2017).



< Figure 2 about here >

Panels a and b of Figure 2 show that a clear gender gap in campaign spending can be found within the group of realistic candidates until the 2003 (federal) and the 2004 (regional) elections. From then onwards, when the most strict quota regulations came in place, spending levels for both sexes have converged, especially because women started to spend more. But while the difference in campaign spending levels between female and male realistic candidates simply disappeared for the federal Lower House elections, female realistic candidates for the Flemish regional elections now even wage more expensive campaigns than their male counterparts.

With regard to candidates in the lower list positions (panels c and d), women were only outspent in the earliest elections when no gender quota applied yet. From the 1999 elections onwards, this gender gap largely disappeared: for both the Lower House and the Flemish regional elections, there has been a gentle decrease in the gender gap during the most recent elections, to such an extent that women and men now invest equally in their election campaigns.

The graphs show that the relationship between gender and campaign spending in Belgium has changed over time, as the gender quotas became stricter. In general, this seems to contradict our hypotheses: we did not expect a gender gap among realistic candidates and assumed the gender gap among unrealistic candidates to increase immediately after the introduction of quota. None of these expectations are reflected in the figure. But it is only by means of a multivariate analysis that we will be able to test whether the reported differences in campaign spending are actually related to gender as such, or instead to other background characteristics

of candidates that correlate to the sex of parliamentary candidates, such as incumbency, age or occupation.

As our dependent variable is semi-continuous, we cannot run simple linear regression models. An alternative approach to analyse these data is to run a generalized linear model with a Tweedie distribution (Parveen, Mullah, and Ahshanullah 2016). Table 3 shows the results of four separate generalized linear models.<sup>10</sup> Each of the models mark a different phase in Belgian quota regulations (years are shown in the table).

< Table 3 about here >

The results show that initially, when no quota regulations were in place yet (1991-1995), female candidates were significantly outspent by their male counterparts. Realistic candidates self-evidently outspent their competitors in unrealistic positions. The interaction effect between sex and realistic candidate does not have a significant effect on spending, which implies there is no additional spending disparity among the highest ranked candidates.

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<sup>10</sup> We also considered presenting a pooled model with a dummy for each gender quota phase in Belgium. Testing the hypotheses implies entering three-way interaction terms between sex, realistic candidate and the gender quota phases. As this would substantially complicate interpretation and discussion of our empirical findings, we present separate models for each of the quota phases. In the pooled model, however, we also find that the main term of sex is statistically significant and the interaction term of sex and realistic candidate does not significantly affect spending levels.

In 1999, during the first election after the introduction of gender quotas in Belgium, we no longer find a significant difference between female and male candidates regarding their campaign expenses. This contradicts the first hypothesis, which stated that the first election with quotas would show an immediate increase of the difference between female and male unrealistic candidates. On the contrary, the initially found difference disappears after the introduction of quota legislation, for realistic candidates as well as other candidates. The fact that the 1999 elections did not produce an increase of the difference between men and women may first of all point to the fact that gender quotas in this phase were not ambitious, but rather institutionalized an already existing situation: Belgian parties were only required to nominate women candidates for one third of their list positions, a relatively moderate threshold which they already reached in the 1995 Lower House election where 32% of all parliamentary candidates were women. The parties thus not yet had to look for a large group of new (and less motivated) female candidates, which could have broadened the gender gap.

In the second phase of quota regulations (2003-2004), when parties were obliged to nominate female candidates for half of the list positions and to have at least one female candidate in one of the three top list positions, we again detect a significant spending disparity among male and female candidates. While the interaction term between sex and realistic candidate does not reach significance levels, this does not automatically mean that there are no significant gender differences among realistic candidates (see: Brambor, Clark and Golder 2006). We calculated the marginal effect of sex among top candidates for this model (2003-2004), and found that the sex of a candidate does make a significant difference among realistic candidates ( $\beta = -0.2498$ ,  $se = 0.0612$ , significant at the  $\alpha = 0.001$  level). Differences in spending behaviour between female and male candidates thus emerge again as the Belgian gender quotas became stricter since 2003. These stricter regulations apparently led to the influx of new and often unexperienced

women candidates, who generally had lower campaign spending levels than their male colleagues. Although realistic candidates are in attractive list positions and hence have realistic chances of winning a seat, we nevertheless find that female candidates in realistic list positions are characterized by lower spending levels than their male counterparts.

The model for the third phase of quota regulations (2007-2014) does not produce fundamentally different results for unrealistic candidates, where we still find a significant difference in spending levels between female and male candidates. As a consequence, the results seem to be at odds with the first hypothesis, as we expected the gender gap to decrease over time among unrealistic candidates. Among realistic candidates, the significant difference disappears again: since the 2007 parliamentary elections in Belgium, female realistic candidates again reached spending levels comparable to their male competitors. Thus, contrary to what we expected, a gender gap shortly existed among realistic candidates as well, in particular during the second phase of quota regulations (2003-2004), but this difference disappeared over the course of the elections.

A possible explanation for this latter finding is the lack of seniority among women candidates in realistic list positions. It is only from 2003 onwards that party selectorates were required to assign more female candidates to attractive list positions. These women had significantly less political and campaign experience, and arguably did not have the resources to match the expenses by their male competitors. After a couple of elections, the effect of candidate seniority presumably faded, as these women were nominated by the party selectorate time and again and were able to accumulate campaign experience, network and resources.

In sum, the findings based on multivariate models do not fully support our hypotheses. With regard to the first hypothesis, we find that female unrealistic candidates have always been outspent by male candidates, apart from the first election with (rather limited) gender quotas. This gender gap did not disappear over time. Among unrealistic candidates, the introduction of gender quota has thus not closed the gender gap in campaign spending. The results regarding realistic candidates were not entirely in line with our second hypothesis either: while we expected no significant difference in spending between men and women among these candidates, we did find elections where sex has a significant marginal effect on spending among realistic candidates. These findings are nevertheless more hopeful: in the long run it seems that the gender gap in campaign spending among top candidates has disappeared.

## **Discussion**

This article analysed how the introduction of gender quotas affected the level of campaign spending of female and male parliamentary candidates in Belgium's flexible-list system. We particularly examined the existence of a gender gap in campaign spending and whether this inequality was related to the stepwise introduction of quota laws. Given the importance of list order in the flexible-list system, the analysis distinguished between gender inequality in campaign spending among candidates in realistic and unrealistic list positions.

The results of our analysis reveal that the effects of gender quotas on campaign spending are not straightforward. While the levels of campaign expenses of female and male candidates were significantly different from one another when no quotas applied yet (1991-1995), this difference disappeared during the first phase of quota regulations (1999). Arguably, this is

explained by the rather unambitious nature of the first gender quotas in Belgium, which actually formalized an already existing situation in terms of list positions yet at the same time motivated female candidates to increase campaign expenses. In the second (2003-2004) and third (2007-2014) phase, gender quotas became more severe as a result of which party selectorates had to seek for new women candidates for their lists and a gender difference in campaign spending arose again.

For candidates in realistic list positions, we hypothesized that the gender gap in campaign spending would not exist for top candidates. We did, however, find evidence for such differences in the 2003-2004 elections. After a couple of elections, however, the gap between men and women closed again, presumably because female candidates accumulated seniority and capital. Contrary to unrealistic candidates, female realistic candidates have thus been able to catch up financially with their male counterparts.

In sum, in the first phase of quota laws, there was no gender gap in campaign spending, for top candidates nor for all others. In the second phase, a gender gap appeared again for all candidates, in the sense that women spent significantly less than men. In the third and last phase, this gender gap disappeared, but only for realistic candidates. This illustrates that the party elites bear, at least partly, responsibility for the gender gap in campaign spending. The (motivated) female candidates in realistic positions clearly measure up to their male counterparts, but as we have shown, women are still underrepresented in these positions. The parties could therefore help to close this gap by selecting more female candidates for realistic list positions. The limited number of women assigned to realistic positions reveals an ongoing reluctance of party elites to equally support women in the electoral process. This elite bias seriously hampers the evolution towards a more equal political representation of women.

What should other flexible-list PR systems in Europe learn from the Belgian experience in introducing legislative gender quotas? Within the group of Western European countries that apply the flexible-list PR system, Belgium is a country case with one of the strictest forms of quota regulations. Other flexible-list PR cases such as Austria, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden all have no legislative quotas but have political parties which adopted voluntary quota rules.<sup>11</sup> Self-evidently, the Belgian system of legislative quotas is more far-reaching and more substantially intervenes in the intra-party candidate selection processes.

Still, the Belgian experience shows that legislative quotas are no guarantee of full gender equality in list positions and campaign spending behavior. We believe, however, that the persistence of gender inequality is related to the unwillingness of predominantly male party and parliamentary elites to drastically reform candidate selection rules in disfavour of male candidates. This was of course reflected in the stepwise introduction of the legislative quotas system in Belgium, starting off with a first phase (i.e. 1999 elections) with relatively unambitious regulations. The importance of list positions in the flexible-list PR system requires the implementation of legislative quotas with specific rules for realistic list positions from the very start. In our analysis, a gender gap among realistic candidates was detected in the second phase of the legislative quota regulations, which disappeared during the last – and most stringent – phase. Among unrealistic candidates, a significant difference between male and female candidates persists. These results suggest that other flexible-list PR systems considering the introduction of legislative gender quotas should immediately impose strict rules on party selectorates for realistic list positions. Any type of provisional phase with voluntary rules will

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview, see: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas> .

continue to provide leeway for male-dominated party elites to circumvent furthering gender equality.

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